

No Rotten Compromises

Dilemma routines for dialogue in the context of systemic competition

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How do you deal with counterparts who do not recognize your own basic rules and values, and whose conduct you cannot accept, but with whom you are in a sensitive relationship of dependency? How can ‘rotten’ compromises be avoided in such relations – i.e., compromises that will be regretted because they support an inhumane regime (Margalit 2010: 2)¹ or undermine the social value contract your own political system is based on (cf. Motyl 2024)?

In many relationships characterised by fundamental differences in values² and systemic competition³, such as Germany’s with China, Germany maintains dialogue channels in diplomacy and culture. Often, the result of this is that for years only diaspora actors are reached; that actors are able to ‘buy time’, distract from other activities or gather information by feigning willingness to negotiate. In other cases, such as in the relationship with Russia, there has been a belief that one could maintain a purely economic relationship with an autocratic regime, without facing negative political repercussions (Leading 2024). With the result that, in retrospect, Germany’s longstanding compromising stance—ignoring autocratic tendencies in favour of economic self-interest—contributed to the emergence of Putin’s current regime (cf. Leading 2024; Krastev 2024).

How to prevent in such contexts that dialogue activities are exploited, without risking that they are terminated in response? How can robust boundaries be established in relationships with actors from autocratic systems, while maintaining important points of contact? Under such circumstances, how is it possible to address serious differences without inadvertently escalating? How can potentially compatible interests be identified and leveraged without blurring the newly established boundaries?

¹ In the context of political negotiations, Avishai Margalit defines a ‘rotten’ compromise as a compromise that is morally “not allowed, even for the sake of peace”, because it is “an agreement to establish or maintain an inhumane regime [...] that does not treat humans as humans” (Margalit 2010: 1-2).

² The term “*fundamental differences in values*” is used here to refer to relationships characterised by differences in values and core beliefs (*radical disagreements*); i.e., differences which cannot be explained by political, strategic or other interests (see Holper 2022; Ramsbotham 2010).

³ On the concept of systemic competition or rivalry, see Hotz-Hart et al. (2023) and Benner (2023).

Dilemmas such as these are a daily occurrence in international relations that, on the one hand, are characterised by fundamental differences in worldviews and values as well as systemic competition, and on the other hand by existential dependencies. These relationships are particularly complex and sensitive when dependencies are mutual. The more both sides rely on cooperation because they could inflict substantial harm on one another or can only achieve important objectives through cooperation, the more leverage each side has – for worse, but also for better. Managing such relationships requires a deliberate and systematic approach to dilemmas, making their particular potential for harm and benefit more manageable and controllable.

China and Russia: Strategies for dealing with systemic rivals

In 2023, the 'China Strategy of the Federal Government' provided a rather clear diagnosis: contemporary China is simultaneously a "partner, competitor and systemic rival" for Germany (Auswärtiges Amt 2023: 8) and Germany is ill-equipped for this dilemma (ibid: 9). The parameters "under which Germany's interests will be upheld in its cooperation with China, while living up to our global responsibility" are yet to be created (ibid). Thus, the Federal Government acknowledged what China, now in a stable position of power, has no longer been concealing for several years: there are no longer any shared rules of engagement (and perhaps there never were any, at least not as assumed), and that the new distribution of global power and hard self-interests are redefining the concepts and forms of cooperation. And one asks oneself: how can we cooperate with actors from contemporary China without compromising ourselves—without undermining our values through inconsistent actions, endangering social cohesion or increasing our economic and technological dependence?

Since Russia began its illegal war against Ukraine and explicitly declared the 'collective West' an enemy, Putin's Russia has been viewed by parts of the German population as an adversary, or even an enemy, threatening Europe's security (cf. DPA 2024). Conversely, segments of German society that identify with an anti-liberal critique of the political system still view Russia as a partner. This societal divide over Russia's role for Germany points to another role of Russia: that of the hardest systemic rival, capable of using targeted media disinformation to sow discord in German society and politics (cf. Tribukait/Trupp 2024). Thus, Germany's stability is tied to Russia not only in terms of security policy and economy (e.g., raw material imports), but also socially. Accordingly, the last Federal Government was striving to avoid overt antagonism (cf. Leading 2024), even among increasingly loud demands for strategies to face up to the political nature of Putin's regime and to establish clear boundaries (cf. James et al. 2024). In this context, the decisive question is how we can speak with actors of contemporary Russia without jeopardising constitutive values and also—symbolically or materially—the sovereignty of Ukraine?

The Federal Government's current strategic responses to this question seek to balance these dilemmas carefully. In the case of China: *de-risking* but no *de-coupling* (cf. Auswärtiges Amt 2023: 10). In the case of Russia: isolation, sanctions, condemnation, but willingness to talk. Looking at both strategies, a kind of basic formula for coexistence with interdependent adversarial systems becomes visible: minimising dependencies and maximising demarcations while preserving necessary transactional spaces.

At present, the implications of these strategic directions are being sounded out in both relationships. By their very nature, strategies can only point in a direction, or at best serve as guardrails, but they cannot give detailed guidelines for specific actions. Thus, differing interpretations are possible (and, in principle, also useful and justified). However, the more clearly the respective dilemma intensifies and the higher the stakes rise in the wake of political developments, the more important it becomes to systematically and concertedly avoid costly compromises. With its military, technological (*dual-use goods*) and strategic support for Russia, China, for example, has long been deemed a key enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine—and thus also a security threat to Europe (cf. Heide 2024).

It is against this background that this article sets forth a concrete methodological approach to systematically manage the dilemmatic pattern inherent in international relationships in the context of systemic competition and fundamental differences in values. Of course, the approach cannot eliminate the need for further compromises in the face of radical differences, but it can help evade avoidable and unacceptable harm in these compromises and to elevate the quality of difficult but necessary dialogues.

Drawing on elements from applied conflict research, mediation, and other conflict resolution and decision-making methodologies, the article integrates procedural and methodological building blocks into so-called routines—structured practices for handling dilemmas that can be easily internalised.⁴

Potential applications include initiating, planning and conducting difficult talks, identifying meaningful negotiation content, or reviewing cooperation agendas. Depending on the political context, some process approaches may be more suitable than others; proposed methods may be useful for preparation, interaction design or internal evaluation. These routines are designed to be adaptable to the situational context and applicable without any procedural-technical expertise required in advance.

From a German or European perspective, contemporary China and contemporary Russia serve as two examples of relationships characterised by systemic competition and fundamental differences in worldviews and values that pose exceptional political challenges. The positional and temporal nature of this perspective must be included in the equation. Furthermore, generalisations (such as the 'German' or the 'Chinese' perspective) are at play, which are rarely so one-dimensional or simplistic in reality, and have invariably been shaped by many other factors.

Using an illustrative example, the following first outlines the underlying dilemma pattern that typically shapes relationships characterised both by fundamental value differences and dependency between systemic rivals. Subsequently, it presents a fundamental paradigm shift and five routines that make it easier to manage dilemmas and avoid compromises with unacceptable costs.

⁴ The article draws on various components of dilemma management from both published and unpublished texts by the author (Holper/Kirchhoff 2020; Kraus [now Holper] et al. 2019).

Dilemmas: Why do these relationships so often produce 'rotten' compromises?

In dealing with China, Russia and other counterparts with different worldview and values, which dilemmas could give rise to the risk of making unacceptable compromises?

In international relations that are equally shaped by value differences, systemic competition and dependency, dilemmas are inherently preprogrammed at various levels. They share a common underlying pattern: one feels compelled to unequivocally distance itself from the unacceptable actions of the counterpart, but relies on effective cooperation in other areas. In these dilemmas, two opposing but equally important imperatives are in direct conflict with each other. On the one hand, there is often an ideational imperative (moral, ethical, legal), and on the other there is a pragmatic imperative (strategic, economic, humanitarian, logistical) (cf. Auswärtiges Amt 2023; Huang 2021).

To provide an example in the context of relations with China: from a Chinese perspective, political stability and economic growth clearly and legitimately take priority over civil and political rights. Thus, the fact that China's current prosperity comes at the expense of the rights of its population (or the rights of populations in African states with which China cooperates) is not a taboo in China. Each individual is expected to contribute to the common good—currently defined as overall economic growth and political stability—and must not elevate themselves above it. In this understanding of democracy, there is no contradiction between autocracy and democracy. From a German perspective, however, this Chinese social contract model lacks the foundational legitimacy required for prioritising the definition of the common good, both for Chinese society itself and for the global society impacted by China's actions: The formation of this social contract suffers from a lack of transparency and participation—both essential prerequisites for the political legitimacy of societal decision-making in the German understanding of democracy.

This difference in values frequently causes problems in cooperation. A true dilemma arises when explicitly articulated differences in the understanding of democracy are consciously ignored: for example, when the word democracy is used in a way that suggests a shared notion of democracy, but the semantic context and the actions performed directly contradict each other in such manner that it is hard to imagine that the term was not hijacked without any intent. When the normative necessity for semantic, ideological and political differentiation then collides with the pragmatic necessity of maintaining the relationship (e.g., because project funding or production capacity depends on cooperation), one is caught in the classic dilemma of relationships shaped by value differences and dependency.

Like every dilemma, this one also generates a perplexing, unsettling, alienating and overall paralyzing atmosphere. When there is significant simultaneous pressure to make a decision or take action, the perceived range of options narrows to two mutually exclusive possibilities ('either-or'). Once cognitively trapped in this dilemma, it seems almost impossible to avoid costly compromises: either you betray your own values to avoid the political or economic costs of explicit delineation (thereby once again confirming accusations of double standards), or you must bear high transaction costs because the delineation destroyed the basis for cooperation.

Value Differences and systemic competition: Why is the pressure for a consensus counter-productive?

The basic prerequisite for the type of resilience needed in relationships characterised by fundamental value differences and systemic competition is a stance that acknowledges and endures value conflicts as a part of the norm in these relationships (cf. Kraus [now Holper] 2011). For if there are radically differing fundamental positions, the pressure for consensus regularly produces the opposite of what is intended: a hardening rather than a softening of opposing positions (cf. Mouffe 2013). The theories of psychological Reactance, of Agonism and of the Tribe Effect explain this phenomenon by suggesting that consensus pressure in the context of irreconcilable positions is perceived as coercion, forcing individuals to relinquish aspects of their identity that are represented by those irreconcilable positions (cf. Brehm 1993; Mouffe 2013; Shapiro 2016). The counter-reaction is an even stronger defence of these positions, making them more absolute, even when other aspects of identity might allow for openness to alternative positions. According to Social Identity Theory (Zick 2003), group identities literally rely on the existence (and cultivation) of an 'other' against which they define themselves, often through delineation (not least also in domestic politics).



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Therefore, consensus pressure ultimately always rather escalates than resolves tensions in relationships that are characterised by fundamental value differences and systemic competition. The approach of Agonism, which emerged in political philosophy in response to this problem, is as follows: if antagonistic interactions can be transformed into agonistic ones, then “the 'other' is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an 'adversary,' i.e., somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question.” (Mouffe 1999: 755). The key point here is that no common understanding of values—or even unanimity of opinions—is required to avoid further escalation. Only a mutual recognition of the disagreement (*agreeing to disagree*) is necessary. This is because refraining

from constantly challenging those positions could generate the willingness to address other, potentially more solvable issues. This, however, requires two things: a willingness to engage in vigorous dispute with words (instead of weapons) and a readiness to focus on negotiable functional issues (rather than non-negotiable, value-oriented ones).

A possible concrete step to translate this into reality could involve consciously reversing the basic assumption, and thus the expectations regarding these relations. The Chinese approach to cooperation in the context of value differences already takes this into account: "in the discourse of the United Nations, cooperation is a means to achieve an existing common goal, yet in today's political thinking in China, it is understood as an opportunity to *discover* common interests and to build 'friendly relations' based on the principle of 'seeking commonalities while preserving differences'" (Drinhausen/Rudyak 2023: 43). Such a shift in approach might be worth attempting: full recognition of differences as the foundation for seeking shared goals, rather than demanding common goals as a prerequisite for overcoming differences.

Routines: How are these relationships possible without 'rotten' compromises?

1. Clarify priorities and set achievable goals

A routine that is rather unsurprising, yet seldomly used with consistency in practice, involves clarifying one's own priorities on how to resolve key topics and reflecting the potential shifts they might be subject to during the negotiation process. Guiding questions may include:

- What exactly are our priorities in this situation? Who or what do their implementation depend on? What do we know about the counterpart's current priorities, and how compatible they are with ours? What does this mean for the feasibility of implementing our priorities and those of the other party?
- What is currently the top priority that must not be deferred under any circumstances? What are we willing to invest to achieve this?
- Are there multiple equally important priorities that might conflict with each other? Which actions are conceivable to cover these priorities successively, partially or in some other form? (Kraus [now Holper] et al. 2019) If this fails, which priorities can be deprioritized under the specific circumstances of this situation?
- How could these priorities shift in the course of the negotiation? Which possible developments could change the entire decision situation?
- Under which conditions, and for which concessions from the other side, would we be willing to make compromises to maintain priorities?

On the basis of the established priorities, a clear, achievable goal for the upcoming negotiation or cooperation relationship can be established. Without setting a goal that has been reduced to the most important and achievable elements and clearly articulated, it can be very difficult to maintain one's priorities in the dynamics of a challenging interaction.

2. Communicate boundaries that can be adhered to without creating pressure to sanction in the event of non-compliance

The second routine is to define one's boundaries. In this context, the metaphor of 'red lines' is often invoked. A red line marks a boundary that secures a system of order. While priorities are positive minimum limits that must not be undercut, red lines are negative maximum limits that must not be exceeded to preserve the system.

Usually, the intention behind naming a red line is deterrence. The clear boundary—often coupled with a threat in case of violation—is intended to prevent the other party from crossing it. However, expressly stating red lines regularly provokes the opposite: they are often challenged as a reflex; facing an overt threat, the counterpart may feel compelled to demonstrate its strength by crossing the line and testing the willingness to enforce the threat. If, in addition, a red line is stated in conjunction with a threat ("If x, then y"), breaching it even forces a next move: the threat must now also be executed to avoid losing credibility. Usually, the one who states a red line intends only to deter and not to implement the threat. However, in the event of a breach, the respective party must follow through in order to maintain credibility (see Terais 2014).

To avoid such pressure and any unintended escalation, the clarification and communication of boundaries must be decoupled from any deterrent measures to prevent its violation:

- *Internal clarification of the boundaries:* What exactly must be prevented under all circumstances in this situation? What needs to be protected, and why? What constitutes an actual violation of the boundary, and what does not, despite the initial impression? When might flexibility or exceptions be possible? This actual boundary clarification primarily serves a party's own orientation and should neither be communicated externally nor to the counterpart.
- *Selective communication of boundaries:* Depending on the political context and the counterpart's expectable behaviour, select what the counterpart needs to know about your boundaries and what it must not know in order to reduce the likelihood that it will violate it inadvertently or deliberately. Pursuant to the principle of strategic ambiguity, the counterpart can deliberately be left uncertain about where the boundaries lie and what the consequences are in the event of a violation. This reduces the immediately available area of attack and requires the counterpart to exercise greater caution, provided that it is interested in risk avoidance.
- *Activating intrinsic interest in respecting boundaries:* For example, if, for a counterpart, addressing human rights issues constitutes a violation of its sovereignty boundary, but it has a genuine interest in maintaining the cooperation, the question is: how can this interest be used so that the counterpart does not continue to violate your own boundary? For example: "We see that our comments on human rights issues are seen as unwanted interference in your internal affairs. In principle, we do understand your request for non-interference. However, we are bound to these regulations so firmly that we can only engage in cooperation if we can assure that no human rights violations, as per our definition, will occur. Please let us deliberate whether cooperation is possible under these conditions." When the boundary is communicated in such a way (in the above example with a relationship statement, a self-statement and a content statement; see Schulz von Thun 2023), the intent

becomes visible and, possibly, easier to fulfil: adherence to one's own obligations, no coercion of the counterpart.

3. Define a corridor that excludes non-negotiables, focuses on essentials and activates common ground

A third routine for conflicts with radical disagreement is to define a workable corridor of subjects: explicitly excluding or setting aside non-negotiable and unsolvable elements, thereby revealing and preparing what could be negotiable and resolvable under certain conditions. This also makes visible what is reliably non-controversial and establishes stable footing. The following can be used as guiding questions:

- Where do obvious disagreements, differences or divergences lie that must be deemed—at least for the moment—irresolvable or non-negotiable? Successfully naming these disagreements and setting them aside can help break the vicious circle of mutual reactance activation (see above and Brehm 1993). Excluding what is currently non-negotiable may generate more openness to address what is negotiable. In some contexts, this exclusion—either postponing or shifting to a more suitable (legal) procedural framework—could serve as a trust-building signal at the beginning of negotiations: certain difficult questions are not on the agenda. At the same time, it is made clear that the existing disagreement cannot simply be swept under the rug. For example, cultural, ecological or economic topics can be addressed, while human rights issues are accordingly negotiated in a specific circle and within its defined corridor.
- What are the essential subjects that you want to address? In principle, it can be about anything, from misunderstandings in communication to practical issues in cultural cooperation or hard political topics such as exchanging prisoners. Sensitive issues might only be resolved indirectly. It is crucial that what needs to be resolved is named in a mutually acceptable way—ideally in neutral but precise terms or, if necessary, *pars pro toto*—so that there is a common use of language. Such formulations might sound like this: “Binding conditions for both sides for establishing a museum cooperation” or “The number and criteria for selecting the objects to be exchanged.”
- What common goals, shared risks or other clearly non-controversial points can be relied upon? Precisely identifying seemingly minor commonalities often provides more stable ground and backing for difficult discussions than assumed. Unanimity on the desired early date for the exchange of prisoners may be non-controversial, or the agreement to exclude the public until the exchange has been finalized

4. Define roles that create room for manoeuvre while preventing evasion

Roles consist of the status attributed to an actor within a social system and related responsibilities, behaviours and values. When the roles of participants in an interaction are ambiguous or ambivalent, the implicit rules of engagement with the counterpart are elusive. Role ambiguity and role ambivalence sometimes exist unintentionally, but are also frequently used in a targeted manner to generate power in talks or negotiations. Thus, actively establishing clear roles can have various advantages.

On the one hand, explicitly acknowledging or labelling a role provides interpretive guidance in terms of a contextualising framing and, at best, a basis for legitimising behaviour that is difficult to understand or accept—this applies in both directions. For instance, in the context of China, it might belong to the role, however defined, to dismiss Western criticism of human rights violations. If a counterpart appropriately acknowledges such a role obligation instead of simply expressing the corresponding criticism, it becomes possible to protect the personal relationship with the counterpart, even if the delineation on the subject matter must be sharp. Methodologically, there are various options for this. In any case, the distance that a role creates between the actor and their actions opens up room for manoeuvre:

- Open-ended questions such as, “How do you see this as...?” or “What does this mean for you as...?” allow the counterpart to name instructions and duties. By actively obtaining confirmation of understanding, one can check what has been heard and understood, for example: “So, as..., you cannot/must not..., have I understood this correctly?” (Initiative Mediation Support Deutschland/Federal Foreign Office 2018: 4 et seqq.).
- Self-disclosures can be used to distinguish one’s own roles and the positions these roles may entail regarding a particular issue (in the sense of the “Inner Team,” see Schulz von Thun/Stegemann 2020): “We, as..., face a dilemma here because on the one hand..., but on the other hand...”; “As..., we would like to, but as..., we are unable to...”; “I am responsible as... for ensuring that...”

Caution and creativity are required when negotiation participants deny their role in the conflict (e.g., as a party to the conflict) and are able to exert unassailable influence by not acknowledging procedural rules (to which they do not consider themselves bound as supposed non-participants). For example, during the Minsk process, Russia successfully denied its obvious role as a party to the conflict and, in the Normandy Format, could even call itself a mediator between Ukraine and the self-proclaimed separatist territories without hindrance. It is likely that Germany and France accepted this role denial in favour of reaching an agreement with Russia. However, tolerating it came at a high cost: even after the Minsk Protocols had taken effect, Russia was unhindered in instigating the war, as it was not required to acknowledge its role as a conflict party and commit to halting hostilities.

Here, a first methodological approach is to introduce formulations that address the different roles and their underlying interests as well as the levels on which an actor like Russia operates. The sum of them, when each is explicitly acknowledged, make it harder to be evasive under the guise of supposed non-participation (“an economically motivated power interested in specific resources, including those present in Ukraine”; “a state that has promised to protect the Russian-oriented population in Ukraine”; or “a geopolitical power in Eastern Europe seeking to assert its position against the United States”). Instead of opening the door to the unchecked assertion of illegitimate interests (as is often feared), a differentiated naming of roles renders the nature of claims explicit, so that they can no longer unassailably be in action.

5. Establish a point of contact where counterparts can contend for the essentials

Finally, despite all necessary demarcation, it remains essential to reach the counterpart at the core of their interests in such a way that a struggle for what is essential for both sides becomes possible. This only becomes conceivable and productive after the delineation has been visibly

successful. In addition to classic methods of actively obtaining understanding and detecting interests, various analytical and communication techniques can be helpful:

Which codes, frames or narratives does the counterpart use, and which do we use to address the core issues? Which forms of self-perception or traumas are they based on? How can we create bridging narratives that function in both logics and do not betray our central points? (Methods: *loop of understanding, narrative storytelling, debiasing/reframing*).

Which positions, interests, values and core beliefs do we and the other side hold regarding the issue under discussion? Where do they come from? How can they be addressed in a neutral way? Which hard interests are mirrored in performative actions, and how to decipher them correctly? For example, if the counterpart speculates that the liberal world order might only be a brief episode in world history: Is it about gaining recognition for the status their country has achieved in relation to the Global North, or is it gaining better terms for trade relations by referring to this status (methods: *loop of understanding, interest analysis, shift of perspective*)?

What is the purpose of blackmail and instrumentalisation attempts? Which power resources are available to balance asymmetries (method: *power resource analysis*)? How can instrumentalisation be re-utilised for own interests (method: *dilemma strategies*)? For instance, if a Chinese partner conducts a 'dialogue project' merely for appearances but has no intention of reaching an understanding, the project could perhaps also be better utilised for own purposes extending beyond the project.

Conclusion: What is solvable? What price must still be paid? And what is it all about?

What can this approach, these routines, actually achieve?

They provide a navigation aid for tackling dilemmas in relationships characterised by both value differences and dependency as well as systemic competition. Step by step, they can be dismantled, thereby defusing the tension. At best, the approach can help in making decisions in dilemmas without resorting to 'rotten' compromises.

Even with this approach, however, a part of the dilemma will consistently remain unsolvable. However, the more focused approach can clarify what you are prepared to invest or surrender, and what not. Overall, the approach can, at best, foster a certain resilience in dealing with value conflicts and dilemmas in international cooperation.

The global situation we are in will increasingly require such resilience: the countries of the so-called West or Global North have become a small and less powerful group in a dynamic, multipolar world where China, Russia and other countries of the Global South play a decisive role. The countless value and distribution conflicts associated with this are part of the global integration paradox (cf. Mafaalani 2020) defining this era: the plurality of powers that has replaced the US-dominated hegemonic structure offers some compensatory global justice but is only achievable through an increase in conflicts.

However, it is still unclear how the heterogeneous political systems and their differing political and social value orientations will position themselves to each other within this global pluralism. Even in the Global North, it is increasingly recognised that the system competition is justified: the bureaucratically cumbersome and, in parts, politically and economically unstable liberal democracies can no longer claim to have the only working model for good governance. A global ideological competition has begun, in which liberalism and autocracy compete for the more convincing models (cf. Anheier et al. 2024). This competition is not only about functionality and stability, but also about value consistency, as Western states are often accused of hypocrisy and moral corruption—ranging from illegal interventions by the United States to economic alliances with autocratic regimes and trading with offshore companies.

A new approach could consist of a self-confident yet authentically honest re-evaluation of European value claims; of a streamlining of unfulfilled, and thus hollow, expectations; and of a reaffirmation of the fundamental minimal values that we really can, and want to adhere to, even under difficult circumstances. This means that, instead of shying away from internal or external criticism, we must reform and change our own societies, and political and economic systems in a targeted manner where they have so far provided loopholes allowing us to sidestep the core principles of the national or international social contract (cf. Applebaum 2024). This does not mean putting our rules for international coexistence—especially international law and human rights—up for negotiation. Rather, it means acknowledging the concrete flaws in the Western implementation of these rules, and no longer letting them be a 'Western' project, but instead making them a shared, implementable project—localized, contextual and system-appropriate. Undoubtedly, one will have to navigate many dilemmas to achieve this. But this will make it more difficult for the autocracies of the world to weaken democracy through justified criticism.

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